DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 867 CS 501 317

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TITLE A Demographic Profile of Talk Radio's Call-In Listener.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Broadcast Education Association (Chicago, March 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Participation; Audiences; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Demography; *Listening Habits; Programing (Broadcast); *Radio
IDENTIFIERS *Talk Shows

ABSTRACT

This paper, representing the first part of a multifaceted study designed to examine the communicative role of a two-way talk radio station, provides a demographic profile of listeners during a one-week period. Data was collected in Salt Lake City during the spring of 1975. Each broadcast day was tape recorded from the beginning talk show until the concluding talk show, affording six hosts of distinctive personality types during the week-day period. Data from weekend hosts were grouped together, providing a separate category. Results of the study showed that talk host type is the single most important variable in motivating listeners to participate, that the demographic characteristics of the caller tend to interact with the talk host type, that the average call-in listener tunes in the station every day, and that talk radio provides different functions for different people. Tables of findings illustrate the text. (JM)

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A DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF TALK RADIO'S CALL-IN LISTENER

Presented at the Annual Convention of the
Broadcast Education Association, Chicago, March 20, 1976

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This study was supported by a grant from the University of Utah Research Fund. The authors wish to express their sincere appreciation to the management and staff of KSXX, Salt Lake City, for their cooperation in making this study possible.

Introduction

This paper represents the first part of a multifaceted study designed to examine the communicative role of a two-way talk radio station. Whereas subsequent reports will focus on (1) the characteristics of interpersonal communication patterns between talk radio hosts and call-in listeners, (2) the content of messages transmitted by call-in listeners, and (3) the specific communicative functions served by two-way radio, this paper attempts to provide a demographic profile of call-in listeners during a one week period. The study is based upon data collected in Salt Lake City during the spring of 1975.

Background

With an ever-growing awareness of the need for public access to the broadcast media and the gradual evolution of informal feedback mechanisms in our society, it is not surprising that "two-way" or "talk radio" has ascended to a prominent position in U.S. broadcasting. As early as 1966, Broadcasting magazine estimated that over 80% of all standard (AM) radio stations included some form of talk format in their regular broadcast schedules.[1] The success of a wide variety of talk formats in more recent years would indicate that growth of two-way radio will continue to accelerate. Industry support for this position is contained in a study commissioned by CBS: "A radio advertiser would be justified in spending up to twice as much, on a cost-per-thousand basis, for a talk station's audience as he would for some music station's audience."[2]

Writers in the popular press and the few scholarly articles addressing this subject provide little agreement as to the specific origin of talk radio. Some of the earliest pioneering efforts in American broadcasting were characterized as "toll" broadcasts in which individuals purchased time to express opinions over AT and T's WEAF, New York City, during the early 1920's. Newsweek pinpoints the beginnings of the radio talk show somewhere in the late 1940's, and McEachern credits Ben Hoberman, station manager of KABC in Los Angeles, with initiating the call-in format in 1963.[3] Other sources reveal that the success of radio personality John Knebel stemmed from a popular talk show that originated from WOR, New York City, in the late 1950's.

Regardless of the true birthplace of talk radio, one is left to wonder why this growing source of citizen feedback has not received greater attention from the research community. Apparently, the first study to investigate audience response to a talk-oriented radio format dates back to 1939 when Sayre attempted to analyze listeners' letters written to ABC's "America's Town Meeting of the Air."[4] Although this pioneering effort did not focus on two-way radio in its present form, it was not until 1971 that listener participation in a talk radio program was the subject of an article in a scholarly communication journal. In this later study, Crittenden attempted to determine the function served by a daily half-hour program, "Speak Out," aired over WAAC, Terre Haute, Indiana in 1967.[5] Plagued with numerous methodological problems, the

researcher (1) conducted a random mail survey of local residents, (2) interviewed call-in listeners, and (3) collected opinions via questionnaire from community leaders. Although the sample of regular callers interviewed was extremely limited (N=8), Crittenden's findings suggest that a major factor motivating people to call the station was the desire to incite others to action and that topics discussed tended to focus on local issues.

Basing the most recently published study on the assumption that a "continuous" talk radio format is less likely to attract callers who are interested in mobilizing others, Turow hypothesized that call-in listeners to WCAU, Philadelphia would be motivated by factors related to a need for interpersonal contact.[6] Findings drawn from interviews with 97 callers offered support for this hypothesis, and also revealed the following results: compared with 1970 census data, callers were older and of a lower socioeconomic status except for "housewives" who more closely paralleled Philadelphia statistics; callers spoke most often on local issues and tended to express opposition rather than support; and audience profiles were affected by talk show type and time of broadcast.

An earlier unpublished study by Groberg found similar demographic information for the audience of Herb Jepko's "Nitecap" aired from 12:00 midnight to 6:00 A.M. over 50,000 watt KSL in Salt Lake City.[7] Drawing from the results of 329 returned questionnaires, Groberg reports a demographic profile for the program. Summarizing these 1968 findings, it can be concluded that a "typical" listener to the "Nitecap" program at that time

resided in a small town (56.1%) or city (43.5%), owned his/her home (69.3%), was over 50 years of age (82.7%), had achieved all or part of a high school education (69.0%), earned less than $10,000 a year (81.8%) and listened to the program alone (74.8%). Consistent with the observations of Turow, this study revealed that the late night talk radio audience has a substantially higher proportion of widowed or divorced women than is generally found during the daytime hours.

Utilizing the findings of these studies and general assumptions reported in the popular and trade press to guide the present research effort, the initial phase of the study reported herein attempted to determine selected demographic characteristics of call-in listeners to a two-way talk radio station.

Method

The study was conducted during a one-week period, April 13-19, 1975 (Sunday-Saturday) at radio station KSXX in Salt Lake City. Each broadcast day was recorded on audio tape, beginning with the morning talk show personality, and extending to the conclusion of the last talk show host.

The station's on-air staff afforded six distinctive personality types during the week-day period which were classified as follows:

Host #1 - Wake-up Comic (8:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m): A quick-witted personality who can make light of most situations. He attempts to turn conversation to the humorous side and avoids spending too much time on heavy issues that are very serious.

Host #2 - Right Wing Conservative (10:00 a.m. - 12:30): An extremely

conservative communicaster who is considered a major spokesman for the fairly extensive right wing element in Salt Lake City. He is considered to be the station's mose effective on-air salesman and requested by advertisers more frequently than any other host.

Host #3 - Light Conversational (12:30 p.m. - 2:00 p.m.): An avid supporter of theatre and the arts, Host #3 excels in the discussion of topics which are of specific interest to the woman of the house. He frequently generates call-in responses by reciting selections of poetry or providing a favorite recipe.

Host #4 - Left Wing Liberal (2:00 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.): A young intellectual who represents a very liberal point of view, he is seen as providing the necessary balance for Host #2. He frequently utilizes guests in order to get more deeply into issues.

Host #5 - Moderate Businessman (3:30 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.): A full-time stock broker who is well known in the community and represents a middle-of-the-road point of view. Generally considered as being open-minded by station management, but whose on-air presence has been characterized by callers as "curt."

Host #6 - Passive Listener (6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.): Basically conservative, he is willing to let callers express themselves at great lengths with only infrequent interruptions. His viewpoints and positions on issues tend to reflect the religious overtones which are predominant in the Salt Lake Community.

The weekend hosts were not nearly as well established as on-air

personalities and did not afford long enough time periods for detailed analyses. Therefore, for purposes of this investigation, weekend hosts were grouped together, and the resulting data were pooled into a separate weekend category.

The research team consisted of the three authors and three research assistants. Dividing the broadcast day into three time periods (8:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon; 12:00 noon - 4:00 p.m; 4:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.), an author and an assistant were present throughout the entire day.

The researchers were situated in a sound-proof room which was adjacent to the main studio and separated by a glass window, thus providing visual contact with the on-air host. The authors served as program producers in the sense that they answered the telephone and spoke briefly with the caller before placing the call on hold to wait for the host. Each author used the same introduction:

> "Hello, this is KSXX (pronounced K-6) radio and I'm _____ from the Communication Research Institute. I know you called to talk with _____ and we'll put you through to him in just a moment, but first I want to ask if you might help us. We are interested in two-way radio and we're wondering if you would permit us to call you back later today or tomorrow to discuss talk radio. We are not interested in your identity, only your telephone number. Could I have your number? (response) Thank you. I'm going to put you on hold now and you'll be the next caller on the air."

The telephone numbers were written on gum labels and placed on the flashing hold button until the host picked up the call. As soon as the caller went on-the-air, the research assistant would transfer the label to a specially designed demographics form and record the exact time the

call was taken by the host. Next, the assistant would "identify" the caller by reading the caller's number "voice over" on a second tape recording of the broadcast. Matching the number with the caller was necessary in order to insure that the authors could readily locate the conversation for playback purposes during the subsequent interview.[8]

Within a twenty-four hour period following the time block to which each author was assigned, a random sample of the callers was selected for purposes of the follow-up telephone interview. Each completed interview took an average of twenty minutes and provided for a wide variety of open-ended responses. Before concluding the interview, the respondents were asked to identify their age, frequency of listening, occupation, educational level and total family income. It is this demographic information which largely comprises the results of this paper.

Results

As reported in Table I, a total of 743 call-in listeners participated on two-way radio during the seven-day survey period. Of those who called in, 473 (63.7%) gave their telephone numbers and agreed to the follow-up interview. From the numbers received, a random sample of 184 numbers was selected, and the interviews completed. This sample of call-in listeners represented 24.8% of all listeners who participated on talk radio during the week, and 38.9% of those call-in listeners who had given their telephone numbers. A conscious attempt was made to keep the number of interviews for each time period fairly proportionate to the corresponding number of call-in listeners.

TABLE I
BREAKDOWN OF TALK RADIO CALLERS
DURING SURVEY WEEK

TALK HOST TYPE	TOTAL CALLERS	GAVE NO NUMBER*	GAVE NUMBER	COMPLETED INTERVIEW
WAKE-UP COMIC	120	34	86	36 (19.6%)
RIGHT WING CONSERVATIVE	123	43	80	21 (11.4%)
LIGHT CONVERSATIONAL	150	77	83	32 (17.4%)
LEFT WING LIBERAL	63	16	47	20 (10.9%)
MODERATE BUSINESSMAN	89	20	69	28 (15.2%)
PASSIVE LISTENER	72	24	48	14 (7.6%)
OTHER (WEEKEND)	126	56	60	33 (17.9%)
TOTALS	743	270	473	184 (100%)

*Includes 25 repeat callers who previously gave their telephone number.

Utilizing 1970 census data for Salt Lake County, comparisons were made between the sample of call-in listeners and the general population of the area. Table II provides a breakdown of these figures according to the categories of sex, age, occupation, education, and income. The proportion of females (53.7%) and males (46.3%) in the sample were remarkably similar to the existing ratio in the census data (51.2%, 48.8%), but there was a major descrepancy in the age category. The sample revealed 18.2% for 18-34 years and 66.8% for 35-64 years, whereas the census reported corresponding figures of 42.3% and 45.1%. The only imbalance in the occupation category appeared under the executive/professional heading. Sample data yielded only 16.4% as compared with 30.0% for the census. Overall, the talk radio sample was better educated than the general population. 45.5% of the sample had attended at least some college, as compared with 32.0% for the general population. But it was in the income category that the most striking contrasts were revealed. The talk radio sample reported relatively high percentages in the lowest and highest income brackets in comparison to the census findings. 23.8% of the sample earned under $5000 as compared to 16.1% for the general population. Similarly, 32.6% of the respondents earned $15,000 or more as opposed to 19.2% of the population at large. In short, the data for the sample can be described as bi-polar, and the census data more closely approximating a normal distribution.

Turning next to the weekday profile which is listed by talk host type (Table III), additional contrasts became apparent. To begin, the

TABLE II
COMPARISON OF CALL-IN LISTENERS WITH 1970
CENSUS DATA FOR SALT LAKE COUNTY

CATEGORY	SAMPLE		CENSUS	
	N	%	N	%
SEX				
Female	399	53.7	234,969	51.2
Male	34.	46.3	223,638	48.8
AGE				
18-34	34	18.2	117,452	42.3
35-64	125	66.8	125,303	45.1
65+	28	15.0	35,007	13.6
OCCUPATION				
Exec/Professional	12	16.4	46,160	30.0
Clerical	17	23.3	33,963	22.1
Sales	19	26.0	22,085	14.4
Skilled Labor	14	19.2	24,533	15.9
Unskilled Labor	11	15.1	27,111	17.6
EDUCATION				
Less than H.S.	25	13.2	71,859	32.5
High School	78	41.3	78,470	35.5
Some College	55	29.1	37,286	16.9
College or Plus	31	16.4	33,232	15.1
INCOME				
Under $5000	43	23.8	17,663	16.1
5000 - 9,999	31	17.1	39,383	35.8
10,000 - 14,999	48	26.5	31,828	28.9
15,000 or More*	59	32.6	21,079	19.2

*The size of this category was necessitated by differences in cut-off points between survey and census data.

TABLE III
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE BY TALK HOST TYPE

TALK HOST TYPE	SEX		AGE				FREQUENCY OF LISTENING			
	F	M	18-34	35-49	50-64	65+	Daily	Few Times /week	Weekly or less	
WAKE-UP	69.4	30.5	14.3	28.6	37	20	61.1	30.5	8.3	%
COMIC	25	11	5	10	13	7	22	11	3	N
RIGHT WING	52.4	47.6	14.3	28.6	47.6	9.5	52.4	33.3	14.3	
CONSERVATIVE	11	10	3	6	10	2	11	7	3	
LIGHT	75.0	25.0	21.8	25.0	37.5	15.6	78.1	21.9	0.0	
CONVERSATIONAL	24	8	7	8	12	5	25	7	0	
LEFT WING	60	40.0	10.0	15.0	60.0	15.0	85.0	15.0	0.0	
LIBERAL	12	8	2	3	12	3	17	3	0	
MODERATE	71.4	28.6	28.5	17.9	35.7	17.9	89.3	10.7	0.0	
BUSINESSMAN	20	8	8	5	10	5	25	3	0	
PASSIVE	28.6	71.4	28.5	42.9	21.4	7.1	64.3	7.1	28.5	
LISTENER	4	10	4	6	3	1	9	1	4	
%	63.5	36.5	19.5	25.6	40.5	14.1	72.1	21.1	6.6	
N	96	55	29	38	60	21	109	32	10	

NOTE: When total N within a category fails to equal 151, the missing data is due to respondent's refusal to answer a question. Fluctuation in combined percentages in each category or talk host segment (i.e. 100%) is due to rounding error.

TABLE III (Con't)

TALK HOST TYPE	EDUCATION				INCOME					
	Less H.S.	H.S.	Some College	College or More	Under $5000	$5000-9,999	$10,000-14,999	$15,000-19,999	$20,000 or More	
WAKE-UP COMIC	8.3	47.2	33.3	11.1	37.1	17.1	17.1	14.3	14.3	%
	3	17	12	4	13	6	6	5	5	N
RIGHT WING CONSERVATIVE	23.8	33.3	9.5	33.3	23.8	9.5	19.0	42.9	0.0	
	5	7	2	7	5	2	4	9	0	
LIGHT CONVERSATIONAL	18.7	40.6	31.2	9.3	15.6	9.3	50.0	9.3	12.5	
	6	13	10	3	5	3	16	3	4	
LEFT WING LIBERAL	25	35.0	20.0	20.0	30.0	20.0	25.0	10.0	15.0	
	5	7	4	4	6	4	5	2	3	
MODERATE BUSINESSMAN	7.1	46.4	35.7	10.7	28.6	14.3	10.7	25.0	21.4	
	2	13	10	3	8	4	3	7	6	
PASSIVE LISTENER	14.3	7.1	57.1	21.4	28.6	21.4	28.6	7.1	14.3	
	7	1	8	3	4	3	4	1	2	
%	15.3	38.6	30.6	15.3	27.7	14.8	25.6	18.2	13.5	
N	23	58	46	23	41	22	38	27	20	

TABLE III (Con't)

TALK HOST TYPE	OCCUPATION								
	Executive Professional	Home-Maker	Clerical	Sales	Skilled Labor	Unskilled Labor	Retired	Other	
WAKE-UP COMIC	2.7	37.1	14.3	5.7	2.7	8.5	25.7	5.7	%
	1	13	5	2	1	3	9	2	N
RIGHT WING CONSERVATIVE	4.8	28.6	14.3	9.5	9.5	4.8	23.8	4.8	
	1	6	3	2	2	1	5	1	
LIGHT CONVERSATIONAL	3.1	59.3	0.0	3.1	9.3	3.1	15.6	6.2	
	1	19	0	1	3	1	5	2	
LEFT WING LIBERAL	10.0	35	5.0	10.0	10.0	0.0	25	5.0	
	2	7	1	2	2	0	5	1	
MODERATE BUSINESSMAN	11.1	33.3	11.1	3.7	3.7	0.0	22.2	14.8	
	3	9	3	1	1	0	6	4	
PASSIVE LISTENER	7.1	0.0	7.1	35.7	14.3	0.0	7.1	28.6	
	1	0	1	5	2	0	1	4	
%	6.0	36.0	8.6	8.6	7.3	3.3	20.6	9.3	
N	9	54	13	13	11	5	31	14	

sample of weekday call-in listeners indicated a much different ratio of female to male callers than resulted from the full seven day period. Of the 151 call-in listeners interviewed, 96 (63.5%) were women, and 55 (36.5%) were men. This finding is more consistent with the expected ratio, since the weekday broadcast schedule clearly corresponds with those hours during which women (homemakers) have greater access to radio receivers. A dramatic shift in the call-in listener profile takes place during the 6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m. time period (28.6% female and 71.4% male) when the men are more inclined to be home. As expected, Host #3 (Light Conversational) accounted for the highest percentage of females (75%), as well as the largest proportion of homemakers. Over half of the sample (54.6%) was 50 years of age or older, and 72.1% stated that they listened to KSXX radio every day. Scanning across the eight occupational categories, it is not too surprising that the two containing the highest percentages are homemaker (36.0%) and retired (20.6%).

In order to determine whether findings within these and other categories revealed significant differences when viewed by talk host type, χ^2 analyses were performed.[9] Table IV indicates that of the six demographic categories, three yielded χ^2 values which were significant at or beyond the .05 level. The three characteristics and their corresponding χ^2 values and probabilities are as follows: Listening Frequency, 27.3, $p<.01$; Occupation, 55.6, $p<.025$; and Income, 34.0, $p<.05$. Collapsing across talk host types for two week days (Tuesday and Thursday) and making similar demographic comparisons with the weekend data failed to disclose

any significant differences (See Table V).

Discussion

The most obvious topics for discussion center around the significant χ^2 values produced by the Occupation, Income, and Listening Frequency categories. The demographic profile presented in Table III suggests a definite relationship between relative significance of Occupation and Income. Collectively, the occupation of Homemaker and Retired account for 56.6% of the sample. As noted in the results section, it would appear reasonable to assume that the very fact that homemakers have ready access to radios during the day contributes to their large representation. In a similar manner, those potential listeners who are retired are also more likely to be present in the radio audience than a cross section of the general population. Given that homemakers and retired persons account for a significant percentage of the call-in sample, it can also be concluded that this same segment of the sample contributes to the bi-polar distribution exhibited by the Income category. That is, the large number of retired listeners are responsible for the concentration of low incomes, and the "middle" and "upper" class homemakers contribute to the substantial percentage of incomes which are in the higher brackets. Viewing these findings in light of the demographics reported by Groberg and others, one can see a consistent pattern of older, retired and relatively low income people comprising a significant portion of talk radio's call-in listeners.

Another finding which is consistent with previous research is that

TABLE IV
RESULTS OF x^2 TESTS COMPARING
HOST TYPE WITH DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

CHARACTERISTIC	x^2 value	d.f.	p <
Sex	11.735	5	nsd
Age	13.793	15	nsd
Listening Frequency	27.308	10	.01
Occupation	55.590	35	.025
Education	24.163	15	nsd
Income	34.007	20	.05

TABLE V
RESULTS OF x^2 TESTS COMPARING
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS FOR WEEKDAY
AND WEEKEND CALL-IN LISTENERS

CHARACTERISTIC	x^2 Value	d.f.	p <
Sex	2.571	1	nsd
Age	2.970	3	nsd
Listening Frequency	2.713	2	nsd
Occupation	8.493	7	nsd
Education	4.205	3	nsd
Income	5.383	4	nsd

the call-in listener can be described as an avid radio listener. The significant χ^2 value in the "Listening Frequency" category is undoubtedly a result of the 72.1% who conform to a daily listening pattern. That there were no significant differences between the weekday and weekend samples lends support to the position that except for an increased frequency of male call-in listeners during the weekend, the audience for talk radio remains relatively stable. And since the call-in listener tends to listen every day, it can be further suggested that talk radio plays a significant communicative role. The open-ended responses solicited during the follow-up telephone interviews lend additional credence to Turow's contention that talk radio serves an important interpersonal function that is not fulfilled elsewhere in the lives of the call-in listeners.

The present study shares a limitation with several previous investigations in that it fails to provide a profile of non-call-in listeners for comparative pusposes. Hence, the data provides no basis for judgments regarding overall audience flow, although interviewees' statements strongly support the position that the talk host type has a far greater influence upon determining call-in behaviors (i.e., active two-way participation with the host) than he has upon passive listening habits. A vivid illustration of the influence of host type on the call-in behavior can be seen by comparing the demographic characteristics for the call-in listeners attracted by Host #2: "Right Wing Conservative" and Host #3: "Light Conversational." Host #2 received calls from 52.4% females and 47.6% males, as opposed to 75% females and 25% males for Host #3. Similar

distinctions can be observed across education, occupation, and income categories. This study indicates that the male call-in listener is more inclined to be interested in political issues, and the female call-in listener prompted more by lighter topics.

In sum, the results of this study are consistent with the widely held beliefs that (1) talk host type is probably the single most important variable in motivating listeners to participate in two-way radio, (2) the demographic characteristics of the caller tend to interact with talk host type, (3) the average call-in listener tunes in the station every day, and (4) talk radio provides different functions for different kinds of people. Thus, if a talk radio station wants to attract a broad segment of the community it serves, on-air personalities need to reflect that diversity. While the more controversial talk hosts attracted call-in listeners who expressed opposition to the ideas being presented, the survey sample, in general, tended to call talk hosts who held opinions similar to their own.

The phenomenon of talk radio in our society remains a near virgin area for meaningful communication research. Recognizing that the interpersonal communication between talk radio hosts and call-in listeners is unique, future research needs to focus on the characteristics of the various communication patterns, the nature of the content of the messages, similarities and differences between callers and noncallers, and an analysis of the specific functions served by talk radio, as perceived by the call-in listener. Questions dealing with the stability of communication patterns between host and caller, differences in the interaction patterns of different

talk radio hosts, and communicative functions of the host-caller relationship are deserving of scholarly attention. Hopefully, through a systematic program of talk radio research currently underway, these and other questions will be answered.

FOOTNOTES

1. Broadcasting, June 27, 1966, pp. 75-81.

2. Ibid.

3. Newsweek, March 30, 1964, p. 74; Margaret McEachern, "The Town Meeting is Not Dead - It's Alive and Well on Radio," Today's Health, Vol. 48 (July 1970), p. 69.

4. Jeanette Sayre, "Progress in Radio Fan-Mail Analysis," Reprinted from Research Activities, Hadley Cantril (editor), Public Opinion Quarterly (April 1939), pp. 272-278.

5. John Crittenden, "Democratic Functions of the Open Mike Radio Forum," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 35 (Summer 1970), pp. 200-210.

6. Joseph Turow, "Talk Show Radio As Interpersonal Communication," Journal of Broadcasting, Vol. 18 (Spring 1974), pp. 171-179.

7. Mary Jane Groberg, "An Effectiveness Study of a Telephone Conversation Radio Program," Unpublished masters thesis, University of Utah, 1968.

8. Playback of a portion of the conversation was done in conjunction with phase two of this project which utilized a "stimulated recall" technique.

9. Sidney Siegel, Nonparametric Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956, pp. 42-47.